

Cameron, Clegg and Miliband Challenged by Local Press Editors over Press Regulation

David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband have been issued with a fierce challenge by local press editors in their constituencies who oppose statutory regulation of the press.

As the Leveson Inquiry prepares to publish its recommendations for a new regulatory regime, local press editors have voiced fears that new legislation for press regulation could have potentially devastating consequences for public interest journalism and democracy.

Four editors, whose titles cover the constituencies of David Cameron, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, Opposition Leader Ed Miliband and Culture Secretary Maria Miller, have called for a new system of tough self-regulation of the press.

Simon O'Neill, group editor of the *Oxford Mail* and *The Oxford Times* which cover the Prime Minister's Witney constituency, said: *"A free press is essential to a truly democratic society. Weaken the former and you weaken the latter. It really is as simple as that. There are no half measures and when it comes to regulation of a free press. You cannot have 'a little bit of legislation.' It's all or nothing.*

"Am I paranoid? You bet I am. There are people in power out there – politicians and public servants included – who utter fine words about democracy and accountability and then do all they can to cover up their corruption and hypocrisy. They have scores to settle.

"The press does have a lot to answer for and, if truth be told, we have brought much of this upon ourselves. If Leveson flushes out the immoral, illegal and downright despicable practices of a small section of our industry, he will have done journalism and society as a whole a great service.

"If he advocates a regulatory body backed by legislation and that is implemented by this Government, he and every politician who supports him will go down in history as the people who made future curbs on press freedom possible... it is society as a whole, as well as the honest, decent and responsible press vital to a functioning democracy, that will suffer."

Jeremy Clifford, editor in chief of *The Star* and *Sheffield Telegraph* which cover Mr Clegg's Sheffield, Hallam constituency, added: *"We have to review the issue of press regulation outside of the hysteria and disgraceful revelations – and do so in a context of rational thought.*

"We cannot allow decisions to be made by politicians who are fast and loose with their own words, such as Nick Clegg who describes the press on the one hand as 'desperate animals around a disappearing waterhole' and on the other: 'The underlying strength of your newspapers seems to be growing rather than

diminishing... you have rates of trust in what you produce which is the envy of many other parts of the media.’”

“The point is that the likes of Mr Clegg draw a distinction between some of the national newspapers and the local media. But statutory legislation will not do so. Nor will it be able to constrain or regulate publishers outside of newspapers – by which I mean the internet and social media.

“So why has self-regulation failed? It has failed because the PCC has no muscle, or teeth. We in the local press regard a ruling against us by the PCC as a badge of shame, to be avoided at all costs.

“If that is not now thought to be sufficient to ensure regulation is to be effective across the entire newspaper industry, listen to Lord Black's proposals. Preserve self-regulation but give the body teeth, the power to fine, bind publishers into a contractual relationship of self governance, with a body that has enforceable powers to investigate breakdowns in ethical standards and to impose financial sanctions.”

Graeme Huston, editor in chief of South Yorkshire Newspapers which covers Mr Miliband’s Doncaster North constituency, added: *“The breadth and weight of the existing legislation is complemented by the fact that we in the regional press at least, we respect and adhere to the PCC code of conduct. And of course journalists, like everyone else, must obey the law.*

“In the face of suggestions of further regulation it should be noted that it is already a difficult and skilled job, in the framework of the controls described above, to hold those in public office to account.

“In Doncaster for example, journalists on the weekly Doncaster Free Press carried out an investigation into a child care services scandal. This involved the deaths of several children and led to the local authority being named and shamed in Parliament and taken over by Government.

“We met sometimes ferocious resistance on many levels, but we were right, and we eventually delivered to our readers a story about individual tragedies that added up to a matter of national significance.

“The question is would new statutory regulations on the press, brought about in response to appalling behaviour elsewhere in the industry, make that kind of story more or less likely to come to light? Political control could discourage or even snuff out investigative journalism which is wholly in the public interest.”

Mark Jones, editor of Gazette Newspapers, Basingstoke, which covers Mrs Miller’s Basingstoke constituency, said: *“Statutory regulation would be a shackle, and it will inevitably have an adverse impact on the ability of the press to act in the public interest. Yes, the press must behave in a fair, decent and responsible way – and that is what the vast majority of journalists do every day of their lives.*

“Any journalist, or press outlet, that fails to live up to recognised standards proposed by a new system of tough, independent self-regulation deserves to be dealt with and punished – and they would be.

“To impose statutory regulation is akin to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The responsible majority of the press will suffer, but most of all, the people of this country, and our democracy, will suffer.”

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